

## IN SUPPORT OF CONTENT THEORIES OF ART

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A content theory of art would identify an artwork with the meaningful or representational *content* of some concrete artistic vehicle, such as the intentional, expressive, stylistic, and subject matter-related content embodied in, or resulting from, acts of intentional artistic expression by artists. Perhaps surprisingly, the resultant view that an artwork is *nothing but* content seems to have been without theoretical defenders until very recently, leaving a significant theoretical gap in the literature.

I present some basic arguments in defence of such a view, including the following. Content views of linguistic communication are ubiquitous, so why should they not be applicable in artistic cases as well? Also, propositional accounts of language involve *two* kinds of content (the proposition expressed by a sentence, plus the worldly state of affairs it represents), both of which kinds can be used in explaining artworks. In addition, the differing modal properties of artworks and concrete artefacts can be used to show that artworks *could not* be, or include, such physical artefacts.

A content theory of art, or a content-theoretic approach to art, would identify an artwork with some appropriate kind, or kinds, of meaningful or representational *content* of some concrete vehicle or artefact. A possible specific form of such a content theory would be one according to which artworks generally were to be identified with the intentional, expressive, stylistic or formalistic, and subject matter-related content embodied in, or resulting from, acts of intentional artistic expression by artists. So stated, the view might sound acceptable enough, or even somewhat platitudinous. But perhaps surprisingly, the view in that precise strong form—namely, that an artwork is *nothing but* content—seems to have been without theoretical defenders until very recently,<sup>1</sup> leaving a significant theoretical gap in the literature.

To be sure, support for the centrality and general importance of the meaningful content of artworks is widespread—hence the platitudinous sound of the above initial statement of a content-based theoretical claim. But there haven't been any mainstream analytic theories of art—whether primarily ontological, epistemic, or of some more miscellaneous or mixed variety—which explicitly identify artworks purely with content-related factors or elements, in a way that would completely distinguish them from

<sup>1</sup>One such theory is developed in my book [2005a], and summarized in Section II. But one swallow does not a summer make, and other attempts, along with wider discussions of relevant issues, are needed to establish a vigorous content-theoretic tradition.

concrete artistic vehicles such as physical paintings, copies of novels, particular musical performances, and so on.

Thus, among well-known views, even a writer such as Danto, who places great stress on the necessity of distinguishing artworks from ‘mere real things’ [Danto 1981; see below Sections III and IV], nevertheless has an underlying hybrid view, according to which artworks such as paintings are physical objects plus an interpretation of them. Or in Wollheim’s case, he insists that genuinely artistic experience of a painting is irreducibly twofold, with experience of its physical marked surface being just as essential to appreciation of it as is recognition of its content [Wollheim 1980; 1987; see below Section VI]. Or consider the widespread view that many artworks such as novels, films, or symphonies are *types*, which have showings, or performances, etc., as concrete tokens—which view assigns no role to content-related factors at all.<sup>2</sup>

### I. Why Should We Care?

But why should anyone care that there are no pure content-based theories? As initial motivation, consider the broadly *communicative* function of the arts, and the ways in which characteristically artistic kinds of meaning, whether in painting, music, and so on, are communicated to audiences with the aid of vehicles such as physical paintings, musical performances, etc. But this distinction of artistic meaning, as opposed to the physical vehicles that communicate those meanings, is closely allied to the distinction between symbolic *linguistic* vehicles, and the meaningful *content* that they communicate. It is widely accepted that language is a fully content-based medium, in which the only purpose of the linguistic vehicles—words and sentences—is to communicate the meaningful contents. So why is a similar view not widely argued for and accepted about artistic content as well?

In addition, one of the main purposes of this paper is, more aggressively perhaps, to argue that a concrete artefact *could not* be part of an artwork, so that we have *no choice* but to seek some content-based theory of the arts. As a foretaste of the relevant arguments—see Sections III–V—consider the fact that Leonardo’s famous painting *Mona Lisa* has as its vehicle a particular physical canvas, which is covered in various particular concrete samples of paint. But of course it is a pure historical accident that *that particular* canvas, and *those particular* paint samples, were used by Leonardo—he could just as well have used another similar but numerically distinct canvas, plus distinct area of paint. But since the same artwork would have resulted even if numerically different materials had been used, the numerical identity of those physical materials cannot be essential to the identity of the painting. Hence arguably the only role left for such a concrete item to play is that of a—numerically inessential—*symbolic vehicle* which conveys the artistic meaning or contents as intended by Leonardo.

<sup>2</sup>Support for a ‘type’ view as applied to the performing arts is provided by (among others) Carroll [1998], Currie [1989], Margolis [1980], and Wollheim [1980].

In addition, it is argued in Section II that often more than one distinct artwork corresponds to a single physical painting, so that neither could be identical with it.

To return to the intuitively compelling considerations about artistic communication, here are some further, related reasons as to why the scarcity of content-theoretic views should be surprising. A Martian aesthete visiting our planet for the first time could hardly fail to be struck by the disparities among the following facts. First, among the admittedly great variety of forms of expression to be found among humans, broadly linguistic kinds of expression have a central place. Second, such linguistic expressions are almost universally explained in content-based terms. For example, a declarative sentence, as used in some context, is taken to express a statement or proposition, which is a language-independent entity that provides semantic information about some worldly state of affairs. Thus what such linguistic acts of expression express is a content-based entity, a semantic content that is a structure of semantic information. Also, even those who deny that there are any propositions, such as Quine, attempt to come up with some substitute that fulfils the same linguistic functions as would content-based propositions, so that propositional content remains the default explanatory paradigm in language studies, as much in the breach as in the observance—as evidenced, for example, by the universal acceptance of first order logic, presupposing truth-valued entities, even among semantic nominalists.

Third—and this is where the disparities begin to appear—broadly symbolic or representational approaches to the arts are common and influential (see, e.g., Lopes [1996] for a general survey, and Wollheim [1987] for an influential particular view), including comprehensive theories such as that of Nelson Goodman, which attempts to provide a unified explanatory structure for all symbolic activities [1968]. Yet, as already noted, none of the standard aesthetic views in the analytic tradition attempt to provide a strictly or purely content-based account of all artworks and artistic expression, which would parallel the near-universal propositional content-based accounts of semantic entities and linguistic expression.<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, writers as diverse as Goodman and Wollheim have been concerned to emphasize, each in their own way, the significant differences of pictorial and musical, etc., expression from linguistic expression [Goodman 1968; Wollheim 1987]. But such differences are quite compatible with a parallel content-based account of artworks, in which characteristic kinds of pictorial, musical, etc. content play a similar role in aesthetics to that which propositional content plays in language studies, even though, being non-propositional, such kinds of content are not capable of truth or falsity.

As an analogy, consider perceptual content generally, which some prominent recent exponents of representationalism in the philosophy of mind—the view that the phenomenal qualities of experience can be entirely explained in representational terms—argue to be primarily non-conceptual,

<sup>3</sup>For arguments against a more limited view, according to which *some* visual or musical artworks express propositions, see Beardsley [1958: Chap. 8]. Beardsley's influence might be one factor in the subsequent neglect of content-based approaches.

and hence non-propositional in nature [e.g., Tye 2002]. It seems clear enough that much artistic content must be a species of non-conceptual content that is at least structurally analogous to perceptual content, given the vital role that perception plays in our understanding of art. So evidence that much artistic content is not propositionally structured counts not at all against a claim that artworks are content-based. So again, why the disparity between content-based linguistic studies and the near-universally non-content-based aesthetic theories?

In Section V I shall argue that one root cause of the disparity may be the persistence of a set of crude referential semantic assumptions in aesthetics, long after they have been abandoned in the philosophy of language and elsewhere in philosophy. Another plausible factor is that some visual artworks such as paintings seem to have an intimate relation to their associated physical vehicles, suggesting that pictorial content alone is not sufficient to explain them. But this appearance is misleading, and I shall argue, as mentioned above, that paintings and other visual artworks *must*, for basic theoretical reasons concerning the identity of artworks, be explained solely in content-based terms, so that traditional assumptions to the contrary must be misconceived.

But in any case, even if *some* art forms, such as painting or sculpture, could not be explained in content-based terms, what has prevented aestheticians from producing such explanations of the literary arts, at least? For on the face of it, a poem, novel, or short story, just as much as a scientific paper or newspaper editorial, uses a language to express a series of propositions about some topic, which propositions constitute at least a large proportion of what is communicated by the respective works. Every other area of philosophy is full of attempts to close such explanatory gaps between ‘a large proportion’ and ‘all’—why not in aesthetics too?

To be sure, there are various relatively technical concerns, for example about the precise analysis of a concept of fictional truth, which may be raised with respect to the propositions apparently expressed in a novel [Walton 1990]. But even if such concerns completely blocked a propositional model of fictional language, other content-based approaches should still be available. For example, Walton himself explains fictional works in terms of games of make-believe, which constitute broadly rule-governed symbolic practices having some significant differences from literal language use [ibid]. But why should not such make-believe practices themselves be explained entirely in terms of the relevant kinds of non-propositional fictional content invoked by their users? There seems to have been a collective myopia about even the possibility of such content-based theoretical approaches.

Thus, for all of the above reasons, the lack of content-based theories in aesthetics is not just a puzzling historical curiosity, but an urgent theoretical imperative to either develop viable theories of this kind, or to specifically show why such theories would be unworkable—or at least why any such theories would be less theoretically desirable than standard views. In the remainder of this paper, I shall show that there are, instead, some potentially significant *advantages* to content-based theories as compared with standard views, hence reinforcing the ‘theoretical imperative’ option in

the above alternatives. But as a preliminary, a sample sketch of what a content-based theory might look like will be presented, to help clarify the relevant issues.

## II. A Sample, Broadly Propositional, Content Theory of Art

One natural approach to developing a purely content-based theory of art would proceed as follows. (Doubtless various other approaches are possible, and of interest, as well.) Given the success of content-based propositional approaches to language, this approach would attempt to preserve the basic structure of such propositional theories of language as far as possible, making only those alterations absolutely needed to account for the differences between highly conventional media such as the written or spoken forms of natural languages, as distinct from broadly non-conventional uses of artistic media such as paints, canvasses, theatrical stages, and so on.<sup>4</sup>

To begin, an important element in the success of propositional theories is that they employ propositions as *intermediaries* between a language and the world. For example, instead of the sentence 'snow is white' directly expressing or representing a state of the world, according to propositional theories such a linguistic sentence primarily expresses, or conventionally represents, a *proposition*, and it is that proposition which represents the world as being a certain way, rather than its directly being the linguistic sentence that does so. A direct artistic translation or version of such a theory would similarly view content-based artworks as intermediaries, which are expressed or represented by concrete media items such as paintings or performances, and which in turn themselves represent the world (or at least in the case of specifically representational artworks). Such an intermediary-based, direct translation approach also has the advantage that literary artworks such as biographies would receive exactly the same kind of analysis, whether viewed linguistically as a group of related propositions about the world, or aesthetically as a literary historical artwork.

In more detail, a proposition is a purely content-based entity that can be broken down into two parts, so that it has a *double content*: first a structural or formal part, such as an individual in relation to a property, and second, its semantic *conditions of satisfaction*, which determine the worldly subject matter which corresponds to that structure, and hence the truth-value of the proposition. For clarity and conformity with what follows, these two complementary aspects of a complete, double propositional content will be distinguished as its *expressed structure*, and its *encoded subject matter*. Thus in the propositional model, there is a double content articulation involving two distinct kinds of representation: first a conventional relation of *expression*, holding between a token sentence and an expressed

<sup>4</sup>Language-using literary art forms such as poetry may be treated as special cases: see the brief discussion of an extension to poetic effects at the end of this section.

propositional structure, and second a relation of *encoding*, in which a propositional structure encodes or represents its worldly subject matter.

Now some care is required in describing such a proposition, in that, strictly speaking, what is linguistically expressed is not the proposition as a whole but only its expressed propositional structure. The complete proposition also involves the encoding of worldly subject matter provided by that expressed structure. But in the propositional case it is usually assumed that a propositional structure uniquely determines its own conditions of satisfaction—to use the semantic jargon—or uniquely encodes its subject matter, as in the present formulation, so that it is harmless to say that a token sentence expresses a proposition as a whole. A similar distinction will apply to artworks, requiring similar care in their case also, to distinguish a usually harmless intuitive formulation from a more precise, doubly articulated formulation.

In the case of language, the relation of *expression*, holding between token sentences and propositions, seems historically to have been of only peripheral interest—no more is usually required of the relation than that a single proposition should normally be associated with, or expressed by, a given use of a token sentence. Perhaps this is all that one should expect from what is, after all, generally accepted to be a purely conventional association of sentences and propositions in this linguistic case. However, in the case of primarily non-conventional artworks, presumably a more searching, and more artistically relevant, analysis of the kind of expression or representation, involved is required. But at this stage we have, perhaps surprisingly, already moved into previously uncharted theoretical territory as far as artworks are concerned. All of the theoretical options—concerning the nature of expression of artworks by concrete artefacts, and its relation to the representational capacities of the expressed artworks themselves—remain open for exploration.

One plausible next step is as follows. If artworks are the expressive or representational content of concrete art-related artefacts, and if artworks in turn represent worldly items, then those artworks must themselves have a representational content, so that overall we have a two-stage, *nested* or *double* content situation, as in the propositional case. Thus application of a propositional model to content-based artworks naturally leads to a *double content* theory of art, one example of which has recently been worked out in detail [Dilworth 2005a]. But strictly, as in the propositional case, we must distinguish an expressed artwork structure as such from the artwork as a whole, which also includes the encoding by that artwork structure of its subject matter. The examples to be given here will be drawn from the visual arts, since such cases are the most challenging for a content view of art, but potentially the view could apply to any artworks.

As a simple initial example of such a double content articulation, consider a picture A, part of whose subject matter is another representational picture B, having its own subject matter C (e.g., Velasquez's *Las Meninas*). The part of picture A in which it represents picture B has a *double content*, in that the represented picture B itself represents its own subject matter. Now imagine that picture A is trimmed down until all that is left is the depicted picture B.

The resulting physical painting is still a representation of picture B, which in turn represents its subject matter C, but now the resulting picture looks just like any normal picture, i.e., one that does not include another picture as part of its subject matter. The double content view claims that all normal pictures are best understood in this way.

But how do the two kinds of representation—in which first the physical painting expresses or represents the artwork structure, and then the artwork structure encodes or represents its subject matter—differ from each other? To simplify somewhat, arguably expression usually functions as an *iconic* or *exact resemblance* kind of representation, in which physical features express exactly similar artwork structural features. For example, if two linear physical arrangements of distinctively coloured paint molecules are mathematically arranged at right angles to each other on the paint surface, this might iconically express or represent, and exactly resemble, a formal element in the design of the artwork structure itself, such as the corner of a square shape in it, whose sides are also at right angles to each other. Or an irregularly shaped and textured physical brushstroke on the surface of the paint would express an exactly similar shaped and textured brushstroke content element in the relevant artwork structure. Nevertheless, such purely visible content elements would normally only be part of that artwork structural content, which would also include the artist's expressive and stylistic intentions, as revealed by, or as plausibly inferable from, such purely visible elements.

One advantage of thus distinguishing the iconically expressed artwork structure from the subject matter content it encodes is that one can then assign—or discover—*differing functional roles* associated with each kind of content, with the *expressed artwork structure* itself serving to explain non-referential aspects of artistic content, such as its intentional, expressive, or stylistic and formal aspects, while any referential or subject matter-related aspects of artistic content are explained in terms of the *content encoded by* the artwork structure [Dilworth 2005a].<sup>5</sup> In particular, traditional distinctions of artistic *form* from worldly *content* can be explained thus. In these ways one can achieve a theory specifically tailored to explaining primarily non-conventional and artistically expressive artworks, yet whose basic theoretical apparatus involves no more than a conservative extension, or application in a different field, of a standard and widely accepted propositional model of content.

Another advantage of this conservative approach is that the widespread reservations of aestheticians concerning broadly linguistic or symbolic models of the arts can potentially be defused. On the double content view, the admittedly highly significant differences between conventional linguistic propositional content, and non-conventional artistic content, can be explained as primarily being differences in the *mode of expression or representation* of the relevant intermediate content structure, plus in the mode of its encoding of subject matter, rather than as showing that the

<sup>5</sup>There may be fewer artworks with no subject matter whatsoever than one might think, because, for instance, many so-called 'abstract' paintings in fact seem to be about the relations of various non-figurative shapes or colours.

whole linguistic or propositional model needs to be abandoned. In particular, the non-conventionality of expressed artistic content as such results in expression for non-linguistic artwork structures being a purely iconic or exact resemblance-involving kind of representation.

Parenthetically, perhaps it is at least partly because of the ease with which this iconic representation relation—between physical surface elements and exactly resembling artwork stylistic structural elements—can be confused with an *identity* relation that explains why it is widely assumed that visual artworks must be physical objects. Since expression is a purely conventional representational relation in propositional cases, the possibility of extending it in this way to cover iconic cases of representation probably has not previously been realized. But such a possibility has always been latent in the propositional model of meaning or content.

Now the *encoding* representational relation between an artwork structure and its subject matter will be discussed. Arguably this relation is a completely *variable* and hence broadly *symbolic* and partly *conventional* one, limited only by artistic intentions plus the interpretive perceptual abilities of knowledgeable viewers in a given culture [Dilworth 2005b]. As one kind of extreme case, the encoding could, as with expression, be a completely iconic relation, so that the artwork structure itself looks exactly like its subject matter. Such cases would overall produce paradigms of highly realistic artworks, such as a high quality colour photograph of a natural landscape, in which the physical characteristics of the surface of the photograph would exactly match the relevant natural features. Since both kinds of content would be fully iconic in such cases, the double content articulation of the complete artwork would be visually indistinguishable from a simple exact resemblance relation between the physical picture and its subject matter, hence explaining the intuitive popularity of simple resemblance views of representation in such cases (on which see Section VI).

However, the double content theory shows its characteristic strengths in the analysis of more stylistically expressive works such as Fauve or impressionist paintings, in which the iconically expressed colours or textures of the artwork structures show distinctive differences from the properties of their actual subject matters. In such cases, those different artwork properties can provide various kinds of *stylistically expressive commentaries* on the intended subject matters, so that, far from resemblance to subject matter being necessary for depiction, specific kinds of *non-resemblance* are normally required in order to produce artistically interesting results [Dilworth 2005a; 2005b]. In learning to understand impressionist styles, one must learn the characteristic ways in which intended subject matters, such as the unruffled surface of a lake or the smoothness of a face, *differ* from the vigorous stylistic and expressive structural elements used to encode them.

A brief comment on potential ambiguities in expressions of distinct artworks should also be provided. On the current double content view, the visual appearance of a picture by itself cannot fully determine its subject matter content, and hence the precise identity of a double content artwork as a whole, because strictly all that is visible, prior to a further artistic

interpretation, is the iconically expressed artwork structure itself, not the subject matter that it encodes.

For example, the highly variegated visible brushstrokes in an impressionist painting of a face could be interpreted either in the usual artistically intended way, as an interesting stylistic rendering of a normal, non-brushstroked smooth face, or instead in a deviant, culturally ignorant iconic way, as an ugly *misrepresentation* of a normal face that wrongly depicts it as being covered in hideous brushstroke-like markings. Each of those interpretations would correspond to a different interpretation of the encoding relation, and hence of the resulting subject matter, of two *distinct* double content artworks.

But, since (at least) two distinct putative artworks correspond to the same single physical surface in the current example, neither can be identical with it. Thus, just as some sentences such as ‘he went to the bank’ can express at least two distinct propositions, so also can some concrete art-related artefacts express at least two distinct artworks, hence supporting the view that finds a common metaphysical basis for both propositions and artworks as intermediary, content-based items that could not be identical with the physical items that express them.<sup>6</sup>

Another issue that should be discussed is that of how it could even be *possible* to perceive artistic content—whether the artwork structure itself, or the subject matter that it represents. For some might think that strictly only purely physical objects or properties can be perceived. In reply, it does seem to be a basic fact about representational pictures that one can perceive their subject matter—such as a lake, in a picture of a lake—even if there is no actual lake that is represented by the picture. Also, in the case of an impressionist picture of a lake, one can simultaneously perceive the impressionistic stylistic features that serve to depict the relevant lake, and which on the present account are part of the content-based artwork structure itself.

So if the subject matter can be perceived, it seems no more problematic to hold that the artwork structure itself can, as well—and hence that the artwork as a whole can be. Admittedly, some perceptual interpretation is probably involved in both cases, of a different kind from that involved in simply seeing the picture as a meaningless painted surface. But one need not be able to solve such broader issues about the nature of perceptual interpretation in order to defend a content theory of art, since any theory of representational art must confront similar issues in the case of perception of their subject matter.<sup>7</sup>

One more issue should be discussed in the case of the visual arts. Nelson Goodman described paintings and original prints as being ‘autographic’, in that even exact copies of them would fail to be original artworks [1968]. A content view can acknowledge an analogous distinction between an

<sup>6</sup>Elsewhere [Dilworth 2005d; 2005e], I have argued that perceptual content has a similar double status, so that potentially a unified view of all kinds of content as having a broadly propositional structure may be defensible.

<sup>7</sup>As it happens, I do have a substantive naturalistic theory of perception of content on offer: [Dilworth 2005c]. But the point remains valid that defenders of content theories of art have no greater problems with respect to such issues than any other theorists of representational art.

*original representation*—such as a particular painted artefact, or a printmaking template such as an etched plate, that was directly produced by the artist—and later, mere *copies* of such original representations by others, that would not themselves be original representations or expressions of the relevant visual artwork. Thus the current broadly unifying theory of all the arts, that potentially finds similar double content structures in both autographic and non-autographic art forms, can still legitimately preserve the relevant distinction, to the extent that it needs to be preserved, in those autographic art forms that currently respect it.

As for explicitly propositional art forms such as literature and poetry, it is possible to extend the purely conventional linguistic model of propositional expression to include characteristic poetic effects such as sound, poetic form, alliteration, etc., as being in part *iconically* expressed by their relevant linguistic tokens. Thus, properly understood, such local poetic or literary extensions of the basic propositional model as applied to language can serve to show the essential correctness of the current, much broader extension of that double content propositional model to artworks generally in all media.

To conclude this brief summary or survey, perhaps enough has been said to show the potential promise, and some characteristic features, of a broadly propositional approach to a content theory of art. The postulation of artworks as being content-based intermediaries between concrete artefacts and the world permits this kind of content theory to provide an intuitively natural view of artworks as cultural objects of perception, having their own integral characteristics. On such a view, just as one can *hear* the propositions that someone utters or expresses, so also can one hear a symphony, see a visual artwork, read a novel, and refer to fictional characters such as Hamlet.

To be sure, other kinds of content theory, including non-propositional kinds, might also be possible and potentially viable, having very different characteristics. Thus it is impossible to generalize about the probable impact of content theories on aesthetics and aestheticians, since everything depends on the particular theory adopted or recommended. However, it is safe to say that a specific theory such as the double content theory summarized above provides a broad and pervasive theoretical framework, having close ties to cognitively-based perceptual theories, that would, if generally adopted or approved, encourage aestheticians to see themselves as being on the forefront of growing and increasingly fruitful relations between philosophy and cognitive science.

### **III. Content Approaches to Generality, Creativity, and Perception**

In this section the neglected importance of content-related factors with respect to issues of generality, artistic creativity, and perception of artworks will be discussed. To begin, some arts, such as music, literature, and film, involve multiple legitimate cases of the same artwork, such as different performances of the same musical work, different copies of the same novel, or different showings of the same film. This capacity for multiplicity or generality in some art forms must be explained somehow.

One widely accepted view is that artworks are *types*, having their performances or copies as tokens (see note 2). Nevertheless, such a view suffers from all of the traditional metaphysical problems of platonistic views. For example, types, as with universals in general, are eternal entities that cannot be created—but it is a widely held intuition that any artwork whatsoever is created at some particular time in history. Also types, as abstract entities, cannot be perceived, but it is equally widely agreed that people can indeed hear musical works as such and see films as such, in addition to hearing performances and seeing showings of them. Thus there are formidable intuitive barriers to the acceptance of type theories of the arts, as well as various more technical objections to them.<sup>8</sup>

However, there is another possible approach to generality in the arts that has yet to be adequately explored. In the case of linguistic expression, it is taken for granted that there can be many distinct expressions of the same proposition, each of which uses a distinct concrete linguistic token, such as a sentence or speech act, to express that same proposition. Hence the meaningful propositional content of such concrete tokens can function with the same generality as do platonistic types in a type theory, but without requiring the same metaphysical baggage.

A similar generality approach could be applied to appropriate artworks also. Thus showings of a film, performances of a musical work, or copies of a novel function could be regarded as concrete items that *express* the relevant artistic work, or *have* the relevant artistic content, in just the same way as that in which concrete linguistic tokens express propositions or have propositional content.

Such a content view of general or multiple-cased artworks could also avoid both of the noted problems of type theories, namely that types cannot be *created*, nor *perceived*. In the case of creation, the concept of representational content is closely tied to that of some concrete object that has the relevant content. Such a concrete object can of course be created at a particular time, such as the script for a new play, and prior to that script coming into existence there is no metaphysical requirement that we *must* assume that the relevant dramatic content itself pre-existed its thus becoming the content of the script.

For example, a freshly painted portrait of a man makes it true of him, at that particular historical moment and not before, that he has been represented in paint. But it also makes it true of its representational content at that time, but not prior to that time, that it may be identified as content that is *about him*. Thus issues about the temporal coming into existence of contents, in the case of artworks, are closely allied with facts about the normal coming into existence of the concrete objects that have those contents.

To be sure, propositions are often viewed as eternal entities that pre-exist any concrete linguistic expression of them, as in Fregean or Russellian views of them, but such a view could be disputed, as involving a conflation

<sup>8</sup>Recent discussions of such problems include Rohrbaugh [2003] and Dilworth [2005a]. See also Section IV of this paper, where it is shown that artworks cannot be types because of their possession of contingent properties.

of propositions with platonic universals or timeless facts. But in any case, there is no pressing theoretical need to regard *all* contents as being eternal entities, even if some may be so. Presumably any platonic types or universals whatsoever could exist untokened, but we are not required to hold that all representational contents can exist in some unexpressed form.

Another way to put this point is that there might be a range of possible, and equally legitimate, theories about the nature of contents, ranging from platonistic to nominalistic, with platonistic theories holding that all contents are eternally existing entities, while nominalistic ones would regard their existence conditions as instead being closely parallel to those of their concrete expressive vehicles or artefacts.

Now in general metaphysics, the most powerful arguments for platonism are broadly that we cannot understand the universe, or explain science and mathematics, and so on, without postulating such timeless entities, whereas nominalistic theories seem to have much less explanatory power. But in the case of contents, there are no such pressing metaphysical needs to postulate that all contents are timeless or eternal, so that nominalistic theories of content are *prima facie* just as legitimate, and certainly much less problematic, than their platonistic brethren. Hence, in sum, a content theory of artworks is *prima facie* much more intuitively acceptable than a type theory, in that plausible nominalistic forms of it are fully consistent with the actual ways in which artworks are genuinely created by artists, whereas any type-based theory as such is intuitively inconsistent with everyday cases of artistic creativity.

As for the intuition that artworks may be *perceived*, including multiple-case artworks such as films or symphonies, here too a content based view is *prima facie* much more plausible than a comparable type based view. Type theorists are forced to somehow explain perception of types via perception of their instances, while yet acknowledging that their own theory requires them to sharply distinguish a type itself from its various concrete, perceptible tokens. Such theories are bound to remain theoretically unsatisfying for that reason, to be accepted only grudgingly if there is no other alternative [Wollheim 1980; Kivy 1983].

But content-based theories do provide a legitimate alternative. There is no comparable problem with respect to the perception of contents that there is with a supposed perception of types as such. For example, everyone is familiar with watching a film and perceiving the various characters and incidents that make up the film, which perceived characters and incidents everyone would agree to be themselves parts of the representational content of the film, which a content view of a film identifies with the film itself [Dilworth 2003].

Thus a content view has a fundamental epistemic advantage over a type view of artworks, in that it suffers from none of the latter's serious epistemic problems concerning how we could ever gain knowledge, whether perceptual or of some other sort, about such an abstract entity. With contents, perceptual knowledge of them is as immediate as perception of ordinary concrete objects, in that perception of the visual contents of pictures, or of

the musical contents of sounds, is just as easy and straightforward as perceiving their purely physical characteristics.

To conclude this section, it will briefly be shown why a ‘combined’ view of artworks, according to which an artwork is a combination of a concrete vehicle plus its content, could not satisfy the generality requirement for art forms involving multiple cases. Arthur Danto has argued a related ‘combined’ thesis for non-multiple visual arts such as painting and sculpture, according to which such visual artworks are distinct from ‘mere real things’ such as their concrete included artefacts, in that they also include an ‘*interpretation*’ of the relevant artefact, which is what ‘transfigures’ the artefact into a genuine work of art [Danto 1981]. Such an interpretation in his view transforms a vehicle into something capable of making an artistic statement, so that an interpretation is clearly at least analogous to the propositional content of a linguistic statement, and hence akin to the representational content of a vehicle as here being discussed.

However, it is unclear how to adapt such a Dantesque ‘combined’ view of artworks to multiple case art forms—including artistic printmaking cases—in that, if a distinct concrete vehicle must ontologically be part of each artwork, there would be no explanation available of the sense in which, for instance, each copy of a multiple print is *the same artwork*, since the mere fact that the copies share a common quality of embodying the same meaning or aboutness (to use Danto’s terminology) cannot override the numerical distinctness of the copies. Hence ‘combined’ views as such are bound to remain limited to the explanation of the non-multiple art forms for which they were first developed (though in the next section I shall show how some of Danto’s intuitions could be captured instead with a content view).

Thus if an adequate content based theory of the multiple arts is to be developed, it cannot be a ‘half-way’ or ‘combined’ theory that includes concrete artefacts as parts of artworks, just as a propositional theory of language equally could not be satisfied with a combined view that attempted to yoke an expressed proposition with the concrete linguistic vehicles that are used to express it. Hence, even if a combined view might seem adequate for non-multiple arts such as painting, it could not work for art forms involving multiple cases of a single artwork.

#### IV. Danto’s Combined View Reconstructed as a Content View

The previous section showed that Danto’s combined view could not work for art forms involving multiple cases of a single artwork. However, arguably at least some of his basic interpretive intuitions can be captured by a content view instead. Indeed, I shall show that a kind of ‘shotgun wedding’ is required, in that his official combined view is *inconsistent* with his central contention that artworks have their art-historical relational properties essentially, so that a content view, or something theoretically equivalent to it, is a necessary step in restoring consistency to his overall position.

To begin, one can extract from Danto’s *Transfiguration* [1981] an argument for the non-identity of artworks and physical objects, namely

that it is integral or *essential* to the identity of an artwork such as a painting that it had a given artistic history, but that the relevant history is only contingently associated with the relevant physical painting itself. Or in other words, a physical painting, as with any purely physical object, has all of its relational properties only contingently, whereas an artwork *necessarily* has its own artistic history—i.e., paintings and artworks have different modal properties. Thus Danto's discussion of indiscernible red paintings that are nevertheless distinct artworks in Chapter 1 of *Transfiguration* must be taken to be about artworks whose relational properties are *necessarily* distinct from those of the others, since the merely contingently distinct relational properties of each of the physical red squares could not by themselves ground an ontological distinction between the physical squares and the corresponding artworks.

Here is how this modal distinction could be explained in content terms. (The argument given here is a first approximation only, and subject to modification later). The representational properties of an object A, and hence its content, are themselves contingent properties of A, in the sense that object A, with contingent history H1, has content properties C1 because of A's history H1, but object A might instead have had different content properties C2, in virtue of A having had a different set of contingent history properties H2. Hence content properties, or collections of properties such as C1 and C2 are contingent properties of their vehicle A.

But this is not to say that the content C1 itself has *its* properties only contingently. Indeed, content C1 can only be identified as such under the contingent circumstances in which A has H1 as its actual history rather than H2. Hence the relevant historical or contextual properties associated with history H1 are *necessarily* possessed by A's content C1, insofar as that content necessarily reflects A's contingent history H1, in that C1 itself would neither exist, nor have the properties it does have, unless A had had contingent history H1.<sup>9</sup> Thus in this manner we could both explain how an artwork as such—namely, the content of a concrete painting—could necessarily have contextual properties, while also explaining how such a content could arise in a physical world involving contingent physical properties and relations. Hence it would be possible to achieve Danto's desired goal of ontologically distinguishing an artwork from a physical object, in that each would have different modal properties.

However, the procedure used to achieve this result will now be extended, so as to show that an artwork having such necessary properties *could not* include a physical object as one of its parts. The method used will be analogous to that used in the previous section to show that multiple artworks such as novels or musical works could not include concrete artefacts as their ontological parts.

The basic idea is this. Any adequate account of artwork identity must respect our intuitive or everyday criteria for deciding hypothetical cases concerning artworks. These intuitive criteria include definite descriptions, such as in a typical statement of Danto's art-historical or contextualist view

<sup>9</sup>Though with a reminder that this preliminary statement is subject to subsequent modification below.

such as ‘an authentic particular painting A possesses some *unique relational properties*, such as that of its having been *the only canvas worked upon by the artist in creating her visual artwork*, or of its being *the only physical object intended by the artist to express her desired artistic statement*’. In that claim, the definite description ‘the only canvas worked upon by the artist in creating her visual artwork’ applies, as a contingent matter of fact, to a particular actual piece of canvas A as used by the artist.

However, there are different philosophical analyses of such definite descriptive phrases. On a Russellian analysis, the relevant description is true of *whichever* piece of canvas happens to have been the one that the artist worked upon [Russell 1905]. This analysis is the most relevant or appropriate one because, in our contingent physical world, the artist *might have* worked on some other particular canvas B instead of A, with B being relevantly similar to A—for example, if the art supply store in which he bought canvas A had happened to give him canvas B rather than canvas A, upon receiving his request to purchase a canvas.<sup>10</sup> Any intuitively reasonable contextualist view of artwork identity must allow for such merely contingent or inessential particular differences in the materials used by an artist. Or in other words, there are possible worlds in which the same artwork content C1 could be the content, not of object A in historical context H1, but of a different object B in that same historical context H1.<sup>11</sup>

However, any such cases are intuitively all cases in which *the same* artwork—including at least content C1 as a part—is involved. But since the representing painting is a different particular object in each possible case, whether canvas A, or canvas B, etc., none of them can be part of the relevant artwork, and hence the relevant artwork itself must be identified with the content C1 alone.

To repeat, this argument is structurally similar to that explaining why multiple arts such as music and literature cannot allow particular concrete vehicles to be parts of artworks. The only difference is that in the present case the relevant kind of generality is that of the same artwork as considered through all those possible worlds in which it could exist, no matter which particular object may happen to be its representational vehicle in a given world.

The argument used above to clarify or extend Danto’s view into a content view could be summarized as follows. The only available way to distinguish visual artworks from mere physical objects is in terms of their *modal* properties—artworks are objects that, unlike mere physical objects, have at least some of their contextual properties necessarily or essentially. However, in focusing on the essential properties of artworks, we also must discard as inessential any merely contingent properties of their vehicles also, including their actual identity as physical objects, because such numerical identity

<sup>10</sup>An alternative purely referential analysis of the description would require that only canvas A could count as satisfying the description, and not also a functionally equivalent canvas B, as allowed by the Russellian analysis.

<sup>11</sup>In a fuller treatment the relevant historical context H1 would itself be defined using definite descriptions rather than referring expressions, to allow for related particular or material differences in contextual factors generally.

characteristics are themselves merely contingent or accidental features of a situation or context in which a given artwork is created by an artist.

Hence the broad picture arrived at is one in which artworks are contents that are primarily identified as such in terms of necessary features of their context of production, but which features are no more than *relevant descriptive aspects* of the actual contingent facts of production, which facts could have been otherwise in various inessential respects, whether in property or object-related ways. In this manner both the nature of visual artworks as items of content, and their intuitively required modal flexibility, can be explained and defended.

### V. Necessary and Contingent Properties

The previous section raised as important metaphysical issue that serves to provide strong additional support for a content view of artworks, namely that of whether there are both necessary *and contingent* content properties. For once modal considerations are introduced into the discussion, via our intuitions that the same artwork could occur with numerically distinct vehicles in different possible worlds, then related intuitions about their *possibly differing properties* also become relevant or operative.

For example, if an artist might have used canvas B rather than canvas A on which to paint a given artwork, we must also consider the possibility that there might be some minor qualitative differences in the canvases as well, that might become artistically relevant, such as a slightly different weave or pattern of minor imperfections in canvas B that qualitatively distinguishes it from canvas A, in addition to their numerical difference as distinct physical objects. Any such differences that would be still be visually distinguishable in the finished painting presumably would be relevant to the identity of the picture. But such differences would only be *contingent* or accidental differences, in that they would occur in some but not all possible worlds in which the artwork exists. Hence the content with which an artwork may be identified includes both necessary and contingent properties.

This point is an important one for several reasons. First, it provides one more nail in the coffin of artistic type theories (see Section III), in that on such a theory all of the properties of an artwork must be necessary ones. Second, it helps to satisfy the intuition that artworks are, logically speaking, at least closely analogous to ordinary physical objects, which also have both necessary and contingent properties, while also showing how that close similarity is nevertheless consistent with a content view of artworks. And third, it also explains in content terms our intuition that visual artworks can have contingent changes of properties in the *actual* world, as well as through merely possible worlds, such as the gradual deterioration of ‘old master’ paintings through the centuries [Rohrbaugh 2003; Bacharach 2005].

Fourth, the relevant contingency of some content properties is also potentially a vital factor in any adequate content-based explanation of the performing arts, such as music and theater. For clearly individual performances of a work can differ from each other in various qualitative

ways, yet we would still wish to hold that each is a performance of *the same* work. A view according to which performances of a work are different contingent states of the same underlying content can fully satisfy that intuitive demand—though, of course, the substantive criteria for sameness of underlying content will vary from work to work.<sup>12</sup> Finally, and fifth in this list of reasons, such a view further reinforces the close theoretical connection developed in this paper between multiple artworks (such as musical or literary works) and singular artworks such as paintings, in that, as has been shown, singular artworks display patterns of modal contingency and necessity that logically are closely related to those of multiple artworks.

## VI. Intuitive Obstacles to a Content View of Paintings

At this stage, my guess is that many readers may have remained unconvinced by the arguments of the previous two sections, no matter how strong or irrefutable those arguments may seem to be in themselves. My suspicion is that our natural ways of thinking about paintings and other visual artworks include, not only intuitions supporting a content view, such as the modal flexibility issues discussed previously, but also some significantly confused or wrong-headed views about the meaning or content of visual artworks, which views primarily need to be exposed or made explicit, so that their power over us may be defused.

As an introduction to the relevant issues, consider again an analogous issue in the philosophy of language, this time concerning *meaning* rather than propositions. A succession of philosophers, from Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, and Ryle onwards, have emphasized that our natural or instinctive ways of thinking about the relations between words and the world are hopelessly misguided. There is a compelling initial tendency to assume that the meaning of a word can be completely explained as the object to which it refers—as in the simplistic ‘fido’-fido view of meaning for words, in which the meaning of a word is identified with an object that supposedly is its bearer [Ryle 1949].

The analogous error in the case of paintings would be to identify and explain all painterly meaning or content in terms of some *actual represented object*. On such a view, the meaning or content of a painting of a lake is simply the actual lake depicted by the painting. But of course, on *this* view of the content of a painting, its content could not be identical with the relevant artwork, since the supposed content is simply some other, non-painterly actual physical object, which normally is not itself an artwork at all.

So the only other alternative, on this simplistic, purely referential (to some actual object represented by the painting) view of pictorial content, is to identify the artwork with the *physical painting itself*. Hence the resultant, purely physicalistic view of visual artworks is the inevitable other side of the

<sup>12</sup>Probably this is a matter of the different purely perceptual contingent properties of each performance nevertheless representing the same artistic intentions of the composer.

coin of a crude ‘naming’ or purely referential view of artistic meaning—which view rests on nothing more than an extremely resistant, hard-core prejudice about meaning that we naturally or unthinkingly tend to have about paintings, just as much as about words. Hence a prime task for an introductory aesthetics, just as much as a philosophy of language, course must be the eradication or undermining of this unthinking referential prejudice about any kind of meaning, whether of artistic or linguistic kinds.

In the case of language, the prejudice amounts to the view that all words symbolize or signify by functioning as *pure pointers* or *rigid designators* of actual non-linguistic entities. Part of the initial attractiveness of this view is that it seems to fit well with the fact that linguistic symbols have a purely conventional relation to the world, so that they have no inherent or non-conventional meaning of their own.

But for some reason it has not been recognized that there is an exactly analogous referential problem, even when a symbol *does* bear a non-conventional relation to the world, as in the case of pictures generally. Indeed, the problem is much worse in their case, because a picture typically does look like, or resemble, an object that it represents (surveyed by Lopes [1996]).

But then it is immediately assumed that the meaning of the picture *must* be the object represented, simply because of the *non*-conventional relation between the picture and the object. Or in other words, the obvious resemblance between the two objects powerfully reinforces the basic referential prejudice about meaning that we suffer from with respect to all symbols, whether conventional or not.

Now to be sure, it is generally accepted in aesthetics that resemblance theories of pictorial depiction are inadequate.<sup>13</sup> But it has not been realized, or at least not adequately discussed in the literature, that a significant part of the attraction of such views is the intuitive support they provide for the same basic referential prejudice being discussed about any kind of symbolic meaning. On a resemblance view of paintings, there simply is nothing to discuss other than the purely physical properties of the painting, in virtue of which it resembles some natural object, plus the natural object itself that the physical painting resembles.

Or in other words, the basic problem with resemblance views of representation is not that they provide an *inadequate* account of the dyadic relation between a representing physical object and what it represents. The real problem is that such a resemblance view remains the most powerful intuitive reinforcer of the underlying semantic view that seeks to explain all representation *solely* as such a dyadic relation between two physical objects, with no room for genuine meaning or content as a distinctive and necessary third element in an adequate understanding of such semantic or content-involving situations.<sup>14</sup> Thus even a writer such as Goodman, who rejects a

<sup>13</sup>E.g., Goodman [1968] and Lopes [1996], though Robert Hopkins does provide a sophisticated version of a resemblance theory in his recent book [1998].

<sup>14</sup>C. S. Peirce made a similar complaint about crude misunderstandings of signs at the dawn of modern semantics, but though his views have long been assimilated and made technically more rigorous in the philosophy of language, they remain as vital and relevant as ever in aesthetics.

resemblance view, nevertheless accepts a pure referential or denotative view of representation.<sup>15</sup>

There is also a more subtle, derivative problem. Even when writers do point out the inadequacy of such a referential account for many pictures, such as those which represent *no* actual object, or which *misrepresent* some actual object, the impression somehow still persists in the artistic community that the basic, simplistic referential account is fully adequate to explain *common* cases of accurate representation of actual objects—so that the crude, no-content referential view still persists as the default view in most people’s thinking about depiction and artwork identity generally, even if its technical inadequacy in more specialized cases is acknowledged.

Next I shall point out a more sophisticated problem that arises even among writers who do explicitly make use of a concept of representational content, and even when they have a suitably receptive audience who fully accept their usage.<sup>16</sup> The problem at this level is now a different one of an over-specialized theoretical focus, namely that the only function of the relevant concept of content is still viewed as that of serving to *identify and characterize the relevant object* represented by the painting. In such a view, a concept of content is a purely instrumental logical or semantic concept, whose sole function is that of providing identity and truth conditions for the relevant represented object.

Thus the ontological issue of the identity of an artwork as such, along with the current view that identifies an artwork with the content of a representation, is simply never considered. The fact that a genuine artwork may have a complex content that is relatively unsuited to provide clear identity-criteria for a represented object is assumed to be either irrelevant, or a kind of failing in that content, whereas of course from an aesthetic or ontological point of view its referential credentials may be entirely unimportant to its artistic status. Or in other words, the fact that considerations of content are inevitably chained to cases of representation, since all content is representational content, does not excuse a confusion of issues of art ontology and identity with the almost completely distinct issues concerning the accurate identification of represented objects, as almost exclusively discussed in standard theories of representation.

One further issue arising from Wollheim’s well-known views on representation should be discussed. Wollheim does accept that primary cases of representation involve ‘seeing-in’, in which the content of a representation is perceptually experienced as such, since there need be no actual object corresponding to what is seen. Thus to that extent he does acknowledge that content properties are perceived in pictures [1987].

Nevertheless, he also claims that such perception is irreducibly ‘twofold’, in that in his view, perception of the physically marked surface of the painting is an integral part of the experience of seeing in, so that in this respect his is a ‘combined’ physical object plus content view of artworks, as with Danto’s view (see Sections III and IV above).

<sup>15</sup>To be sure, Goodman does distinguish a dyadic representation of an F from a monadic F-picture. But that is a subsidiary issue, since issues of content do not arise in monadic predication cases.

<sup>16</sup>Such as any of the standard works already mentioned.

However, such a view may be undermined from two different directions. First, it is only a crude referential view of the relevant content that could make it seem as if perceived painterly elements such as brushstrokes *must* hence be non-content, purely physical properties. Just as poetry is a content-based art, which can be expressive without describing or referring to objects, so also much painting can be stylistically expressive in a painterly way, using brushstrokes etc., even though those seen brushstrokes are not directly relevant to the identification of some objects seen in the picture. Pictures of *course* have stylistic content, including brushstroke content, as well as referential content, but for some reason theoreticians forget this and fall back on a crude perceptual duality of pure physical properties, as distinct from pure referential content, in describing their experiences of paintings (see Section II and Dilworth [2005b]).

The second way of undermining Wollheim's claim of perception of purely physical properties in twofold experiences is as follows. In a broader philosophical perspective, it has been recognized since the birth of modern empiricism that perceptual experiences of colours or sounds are perceptions of 'secondary qualities', which may or may not correspond to any actual physical qualities of worldly objects. Such debates continue to the present day, so that it is at least a *respectable* philosophical position to regard all experiences of colours and sounds, etc., as being experiences only of our own perceptual contents, rather than of actual physical qualities. Hence, quite apart from any of the other arguments given in this paper, content views of artworks ought to be at least *as* common, respectable and accepted as the corresponding metaphysical or epistemological views about the subjective or dependent status of secondary qualities.

Thus, to sum up, clearly the remarkable, virtually complete theoretical absence of content theories of the arts is philosophically indefensible, whether because of broader 'secondary quality' considerations, or because of the many arguments given in this paper in favour of such theories.<sup>17</sup>

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